Cynthia Canty: Do corporations have too much power and too little oversight? It’s a question that has dominated American society pretty much since the Civil War and it doesn’t seem to be going away any time soon. Over the decades, the political pendulum has swung back and forth between workers’ rights and corporate power. This Saturday marks the 81st anniversary of the Battle of the Overpass, which many refer to as a turning point in just how people looked at the labor movement. Joining us again is the Michigan History Center’s Rachel Clark. Welcome back Rachel.

Rachel Clark: Thanks for having me.

Cynthia Canty: So let’s set the table now so listeners get some context. It’s 1937. It’s a few years into the New Deal, and just two years since the National Labor Relations Act became the law. Remind us again just that law meant for workers.

Rachel Clark: So the National Labor Relations Act, or the Wagner Act, it meant that businesses had to fairly bargain with any union supported by the majority of the workers within that business. Unions weren’t new, but most of them had been representing skilled trades. So after 1935 you get some unskilled trades that were able to bargain and have a voice within the industry.

Cynthia Canty: And for those who may remember their Michigan history, let’s just say the auto companies did not exactly like the idea of their employees having collective bargaining rights. Is that fair? [Laughs]

Rachel Clark: Yes, that is very fair. They did not like it. So at that time the auto industry was very paternalistic. You get people like Henry Ford, R. E. Olds, Alfred Sloan, and they see themselves as sort of the overseer and the father-figure to their workers, and they do not believe their workers should have any say in things like pay or hours or conditions or overtime. So they fight unions who are trying to organize that unskilled labor force.

Cynthia Canty: Tooth-and-nail fighting I think is probably fair to say. [Laughs]

Rachel Clark: Yes. [Laughs] Lots of money put behind it too.

Cynthia Canty: There you go. And Henry Ford in particular really, really wanted to keep those labor organizers away from his company. How did he go about that?

Rachel Clark: He did it a couple ways. So he starts with his $5-a-day work wage. And that comes in about 1913, and he sees that as a way to keep his employees happy. If he’s paying them a lot of money, then there’s no reason for them to unionize and to organize. And so he starts with that. He also has a sociological department within the Ford Corporation. That group keeps tabs on its workers, especially its immigrant workers. So they make sure that they are temperate, that they are learning and speaking English. They monitor the spending habits of the workers. And so he is
very much keeping track of his workers. He also finally has what's called the Ford Service Department, which sort of sounds like it's someplace you bring your car in, but it's not. It's a security force. They actually patrol the shop floor listening for union talk, and will fire people on the spot.

Cynthia Canty: So here we are, Spring of 1937. There had been success at General Motors. There had been success at Chrysler. So the UAW, United Auto Workers, decide, let's up that organizing game at Ford. What was supposed to happen on that fateful day, on May 26, 1937?

Rachel Clark: So the UAW organizers led by Walter Reuther and a gentleman named Richard Frankensteen, they along with clergy and civil liberties members and members of the women's brigade, which is a group of women who supported union organizations. They had a permit to hand out union pamphlets on the Miller Road Overpass to employees as they were leaving the River Rouge plant.

Cynthia Canty: That's what was supposed to happen. What actually happened?

Rachel Clark: Harry Bennett, who was the head of Ford Service Department, he and other security forces told Reuther they had to leave, and Reuther and his group refused. So Bennett’s crew brutally attacked these organizers. The women’s brigade was attacked. It was very bloody and very brutal beating in front of this crowd of union supporters, civil liberties people, AND members of the press, including reporters and photographers. There was a gentleman there named James Kilpatrick, who was a Detroit News photographer.

Cynthia Canty: And James Kilpatrick’s camera was busy, wasn’t it, while this was all going on?

Rachel Clark: It was. He was snapping shots of the whole thing. He had actually posed Reuther and some of the other people in front of the Ford Company sign. And so he had been there, you know, taking shots, action shots, posed shots, and then when all this began his camera started going pretty nuts. He actually ended up getting some pretty good shots from it.

Cynthia Canty: Do we have any sense of how many were hurt and what the toll was of this attack?

Rachel Clark: I think it was eight people who were hurt. One gentleman apparently had his back injured badly, if not broken. Richard Frankensteen, there are photos of him, and he was beaten bloody. He was a big man and he said the worst beating he’d ever had in his life. So there are severe injuries that come out of this.

Cynthia Canty: And then the Ford security guards realize, what, maybe beating people up in front of reporters might not have been the best idea? Did they try to cover up the beatings?

Rachel Clark: They did. Once it was done and the people were standing around they ended up chasing people off. They were taking notebooks from the reporters. They were taking and destroying cameras from the photographers. And they actually chased James Kilpatrick to his car. He ran and while he was in his car he was actually able to switch out the negative plates that were in his camera for blank plates. So when they finally caught up with him, he handed over what essentially are blank plates and hid the real negative plates in his car.

Cynthia Canty: You know, you honestly couldn't script this. [Laughs]
Rachel Clark: No. [Laughs]

Cynthia Canty: You really couldn’t. Is that how the truth came out? It was through the Kilpatrick photos or what other avenues?

Rachel Clark: So Reuther and the people that he was with, they reported to the police and press what had happened. Bennett denies the entire thing. He says that it was union sympathizers that had started it, and that his people had nothing to do with it; they were actually trying to help. And he denied the entire thing. Until the Kilpatrick photos were published and released in a Detroit News story about what had happened and it became known as the Battle of the Overpass.

Cynthia Canty: And so the aftermath of these photos of James Kilpatrick, there they are in the Detroit News for everybody to see. Men and women being beaten. Was Henry Ford able to keep the UAW out of his company?

Rachel Clark: No. He tried. He increased wages again to try to keep workers happy, but it was far beyond that point by then. So between the bad publicity of the photos and then Ford had to appear in front of the National Labor Relations Board to explain violations of the Wagner Act. So finally he agreed to a contract with the UAW.

Cynthia Canty: What about all of this for the labor movement on a national level, what did it do?

Rachel Clark: It really gave it a boost. You start seeing labor candidates running for office. We have a pro-labor president at that time; that helps. And we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel of the Depression. So you start to see other industries unionize. You’re getting labor leaders in office. And then we go into World War II, and unions are working very closely with businesses and organizations to keep production going. The idea of a strike during WWII is a pretty big threat. You need to keep that wartime production going. You start to see the increase and the growth and the power of unions at this time.

Cynthia Canty: So can one rightfully argue that on that fateful day of May 26, 1937, Ford may have won the battle, but lost the war against workers’ rights to collective bargaining?

Rachel Clark: Much to his chagrin. Yes, he did.

Cynthia Canty: The Michigan History Center’s Rachel Clark. Rachel, thank you so much for sharing the story of the infamous Battle of the Overpass, which happened May 26, 1937.

Rachel Clark: Thank you for having me.